

# The “MacBurger”, Non-State Universities and the Changing Landscape of Higher Education in Sri Lanka

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*At this very postmodern [neoliberal] moment that finds the University nearing what may be its end.*

Liotard (cited in Readings 1996, p. 6)

## **Abstract**

*In the present moment of global capitalism, the marketisation of higher education is a reality in the Global South and North. Yet, the Southern experience of marketisation differs from that of the North. This article examines how market-based development in Sri Lanka since the economic liberalisation of 1977 has reshaped Sri Lankan university education. It revisits the historical evolution of “free (higher) education” and critically analyses the influx of global brands into the country’s “education market”. Using the “MacBurger” as a metaphor—for “posh” food in Sri Lanka—the article shows how the influx, together with the rise of fee-levying non-state (and state) universities, endangers the legacy of Sri Lankan (university) education as a “public good”. In conclusion, the article emphasises the widening educational inequality in the country and argues that higher education cannot be left to the free market in the peripheral countries of the South.*

**Keywords:** neoliberalism, non-state universities, marketisation, corporate middle class, free education

## **Introduction**

Under the hot sun of the midday rush hour in the city of Colombo, carrying placards and shouting slogans, thousands of university students were marching towards the University Grants Commission. They were approaching the police barricades on the road to the commission at Ward Place, Colombo. As the students neared the commission, their voices became louder: “Protect free education”! They were agitated. A clash was imminent.

A few kilometres off Ward Place, in the city of Rajagiriya, there was a queue of vehicles. Members of Sri Lanka’s “corporate middle class”<sup>1</sup> were driving them with their children inside: One after another, they passed through the McDonald’s Drive-Thru to buy their lunch—a MacBurger, a “posh” (expensive) food<sup>2</sup> in Sri Lanka.

And so goes everyday urban life in the island nation of Sri Lanka. One may wonder how these contrasting happenings manifest the uneven development of the country’s political economy in the present moment of neoliberal global capitalism. Do they exemplify some fundamental changes in socially sensitive areas of Sri Lankan society (such as university education) since the economic liberalisation of 1977 and particularly since the 2009 end of the 30-year separatist war<sup>3</sup>?

Many turning points have characterised modern university education in Sri Lanka, which dates back to the pre-independence era<sup>4</sup> (Gamage 1996; Pathmanathan 2000). Yet, from the establishment of the first university in 1942 to recent decades, university education has been a “public good”—that the government has provided “solely” for all qualified students with no course fee. Hence, the country’s university education has acted as leverage for the upward social mobility of ordinary people (Jayasuriya 1979; Udagama 1999).

However, economic liberalisation has had an impact on Sri Lankan higher education. Over the last four decades, especially since the end of the war, university education has been subject to a process that has reshaped its fundamentals: Tuition-free education, the role of the state as the “sole” player, and the open admission policy (Pathmanathan 2000). While the process defies the legacy of university education as a public good, it appears inevitable: The constraints of the Sri Lankan political economy and higher education drive it (Pitigala-Arachchi 2012), as do the ever-strengthening “neoliberal common sense” (Alcántara, Llomovatte & Romão 2013; Taylor 2017; Torres 2013). Consequently, the establishment of market-driven non-state (and state) institutes of higher education has been identified as the panacea for the issues facing the country’s higher education (Abeyratne & Lekamge 2012; Pitigala-Arachchi 2012).

Despite this fundamental policy shift, there has been no substantial scholarly attempt to understand the effects of marketisation on Sri Lankan university education except a limited number of scholarly revisits (for example, Abeyratne & Lekamge 2012; Gamage 1996; Little & Hettige 2016; Pathmanathan 2000). Nevertheless, marketisation is subject to resistance by a considerable proportion of the staff and students of state universities and other social actors (‘Don’t recognise SAITM degree – SLMC’ 2015; Liyanage 2012; ‘SAITM as model for expanding medical education?’ 2017). The literature also documents the effects of marketisation on universities across the world (Alcántara et al. 2013; De Angelis & Harvie 2009; Rikowski 2012; Saunders 2010; Taylor 2017; Wilson & Scarbrough 2016). Literature though limited suggests that the marketisation effects in the peripheral countries of the South differ from those in the core capitalist societies of the North due to the historical evolution of the Southern societies and their education systems (see, for example, Gamage 1996; Little & Hettige 2016). In fact, in the peripheral countries, marketisation has far more

adverse consequences; increasing student unrest and social inequality for example (Alcántara et al. 2013; Stromquist & Sanyal 2013).

In this backdrop, this article intends to examine the changes that marketisation has brought to higher education in the peripheral countries of the South and, to be more precise, to university education in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan case is unique for a couple of reasons: On the one hand, Sri Lanka was the first country in South Asia that “opened up” its economy (Kadirgamar 2017). On the other hand, the country inherits a long-standing free education policy (up to the university level), which is referred to as the Kannangara reforms of the 1940s<sup>5</sup>, for all (qualified) students, regardless of class, caste, religion, and ethnicity (Hettige 2000). Therefore, recognising the lack of literature on the subject, this article seeks to accomplish two ethico-political objectives: How market-based development became a reality in the higher education landscape after economic liberalisation, and what effects marketisation had on university education (and wider society) in the country. To accomplish this, the article revisits the historical evolution of “free (higher) education” in Sri Lanka. Using the “MacBurger” as a metaphor—for the “posh” food in Sri Lanka—it critically analyses the influx of “global educational brands” into the emerging “higher education market” of the country.

The article has been organised as follows. First, it revisits the historical evolution of the country’s higher education to see how university education continued to be a public good until recent years. Second, it analyses the role of universities in the neoliberal era. Third, it articulates a “genealogical account” of the reshaping of the higher education landscape after economic liberalisation. Here, it uses the enthusiasm of Sri Lanka’s corporate middle class to associate with global brands, such as the MacBurger, the *metaphor* for posh food (or products) in Sri Lanka: The article considers how “low-ranked” universities in

core capitalist societies have become “posh universities” in the Global South—the case of higher education market in Sri Lanka. Finally, it examines the effects of the reshaping process. To conclude, the article emphasises the widening educational inequality in Sri Lanka and argues that, in the peripheral countries of the South, higher education cannot be left to the free market.

### **The higher education landscape in Sri Lanka**

Higher education in Sri Lanka, which Buddhist monastic traditions inspired, dates back to the 5th and 10th centuries (Udagama 1999). From the 18th century onwards, Western education was the key force that shaped higher education, though the role of Buddhist *pirivenas* (Buddhist education institutes) and Hindu education institutes was also notable (Gamage 1996; Udagama 1999). History shows that these parallel systems provided higher education for two strata of Sri Lankan society: The Ceylon University College, which was established in 1921, offered degrees to “bilingual” (English and Sinhala/Tamil) students from the middle and upper classes, whereas students at *pirivenas* continued to be Buddhist novice monks and lay students of modest social backgrounds.

Alongside this historical legacy, in 1942, the University of Ceylon was established as the first university by amalgamating the Ceylon University College, and the Ceylon Medical College, which had been established in 1870 (Pathmanathan 2000). However, “class division” in higher education continued undisturbed even after the establishment of the University of Ceylon. Students of modest social background, who only had competency in their mother tongue (Sinhala or Tamil), hardly joined the University due to the language barrier. Indeed, the University of Ceylon was restrictive and catered to the English-speaking, bilingual elite class, although the education was tuition-free (Udagama 1999).

### The democratisation of university education

Socio-political developments in post-independence Sri Lanka in the 1950s and 1960s opened up university education to students from modest social backgrounds (Jayasuriya 1979). Children, who studied in their mother tongues due to the Kannangara reforms, sat for university entrance examination in 1959 (Gamage 1996). Government policy on “Swabhasha” (the national languages of Sinhala and Tamil) as media of instruction and administration, which was passed in 1956, and the uplifting of the Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara Pirivenas<sup>6</sup> to the level of universities in 1958 facilitated the absorption of these students into universities (Pathmanathan 2000).

With this background, university education emerged as leverage for the upward social mobility of low-income and middle-income families; the brightest students of modest social background immensely benefited from the free education policy (Jayasuriya 1979; Udagama 1999): Indeed, as Hettige (2000, p. 325) points out, free education “was supposed to facilitate upward social mobility of individuals irrespective of their birth status in terms of caste, class, religion and ethnicity”. Yet, these developments also led to the deterioration of the standards of the university system (Gamage 1996; Pathmanathan 2000). On the one hand, most schools in the rural areas of the country did not have the facilities to teach science subjects for the university entrance examination. As a result, the majority of students who qualified for university admission were not only arts and humanities students, but they were also solely proficient in their home language—Sinhala or Tamil. On the other hand, the newly established Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara Universities were committed to the arts and humanities. Hence, the universities were overcrowded with arts and humanities students, whereas the number of students enrolled in science programmes diminished over time (Jayasuriya 1979; Pathmanathan 2000).

Thus, from the late 1950s, university education shifted from the legacy of the University of Ceylon—an “Oxbridge model”, which Sir Ivor Jennings, a British scholar-bureaucrat, founded. The changes that subsequently took place in higher education were neither related to the founders’ vision for the University of Ceylon (Jayasuriya 1979; Pathmanathan 2000) nor really informed by the notion of the modern Western university, a site of the production and preservation of (original) knowledge (Readings 1996). Instead, what Torres (2011, p. 180) calls “the eminently political role of education” overshadowed the changes: The role was, nevertheless, imbued with the dynamics of wider society, for instance, the switch to Swabhasha, the expansion of universities, and the nationalisation of private schools. Moreover, it manifested part of the burning desire of the country’s underprivileged (Sinhala-speaking) social strata (Hettige 2000). Indeed, university education in the 1950s and 1960s continued as a means that promised social equality, justice, and upward social mobility<sup>7</sup> (Hettige 2000; Jayasuriya 1979).

In the late 1960s, university education’s role as leverage for upward social mobility was deteriorating. Many graduates were struggling to find suitable jobs, and unemployment in the demography was as high as 10,000 (Sanyal et al. 1983, p. 180)—which exceeds two years’ graduate output of the entire university system in the late 1960s; for example graduate output in 1968 and 1969 was 4,652 and 4,312 in sequence (Sanyal et al. 1983, p. 144). Furthermore, universities were becoming breeding grounds for (Sinhala) youth radicalism (Hettige 2000). Despite the widening gap between the (job) market requirements and the graduates’ knowledge and skill profile, even after the 1960s, higher education policies leaned more towards the dynamics of wider society than those of the market (Pathmanathan 2000).

Thus, the notable feature of Sri Lankan university education was that, until recent years, it remained a public good—one that state universities solely offered. Prevailing issues, such as graduate employability, received emphasis from time to time (Pathmanathan 2000; Sanyal et al. 1983); but the eminently political role of university education persisted without much interruption. For example, even when the Open University of Sri Lanka was established in 1980 as the first fee-levying university, marketisation did not play a marked role in the government’s higher education policy. Nevertheless, after economic liberalisation in general and the post-war era in particular, the emerging market forces in higher education have threatened the eminently political role of university education. This is evident in the following section.

### **Universities in the neoliberal era**

In the latter part of the 1970s, a new economic order, which scholars call neoliberalism, was spreading across the world. It superseded the “welfare economy”, or “embedded liberalism”, which showed “...how market processes and entrepreneurial and corporate activities were surrounded by a web of social and political constraints and a regulatory environment...”, and reemphasised the role of the market (Harvey 2005, p. 11). Subsequently, it compelled the state to bring phenomena from outside the market, such as *education*, into the market so that they would acquire market-value (Rikowski 2012; Saunders 2010; Torres 2013). Neoliberalism, as a theory of political economic practices,

... proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. . . . [I]f markets do not exist (in areas such as . . . education . . .) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. (Harvey 2005, p. 2)



As part of the neoliberal agenda, during the 1970s and 1980s, deregulation, marketisation, and privatisation—profound logic of neoliberalism—were applied in education, particularly in university education, which existed mostly outside market competition. Hence, during this period, university education was not just subject to marketisation in countries such as the United States, where the role of the state in social welfare was less significant (Readings 1996; Saunders 2010). Instead, attempts to marketise university education also occurred in traditional welfare states such as the United Kingdom under the Thatcher government (De Angelis & Harvie 2009; Rikowski 2012).

Thus, neoliberalism brought about fundamental changes in historically embedded three ideas of the (Western) university: The Kantian concept of reason, the Humboldtian idea of culture (the model of the modern university that the German idealist, Humboldt, instituted at the University of Berlin in the early 19th century), and the techno-bureaucratic notion of excellence (Readings 1996, p. 14). Informed by the peculiar notion of “excellence”—over the pre-modern tradition of the University—neoliberalism deployed the process of commodification (that of degrees) transforming students into “consumers”. Indeed, the question of universities in the neoliberal era, as Readings (1996, p. 27) argues, “is only the question of relative value-for-money, the question posed to a student who is situated entirely as a *consumer*, rather than as someone who wants to think”. Yet, this positioning of the “student as consumer” is to be taken a must in its appearance: This has served not only to marketise university education and to commodify degrees but also to implement the “necessary” changes in state universities and make them competitive in the “free (education) market” (Rikowski 2012; Torres 2011).

### The university as a “market enterprise”

With this background, neoliberalism brought some fundamental changes to universities via marketisation, commodification, and capitalisation. As Rikowski (2012, p. 24) indicates, on the plane of marketisation, neoliberalism encourages free market-based development in higher education “through the development of choice, competition, and the money relation through the buying and selling of goods and services”. Along with degrees, all facets of “knowledge production” in universities, including modules, lectures, and research, are commodified. In addition, on the plane of capitalisation, it encourages universities to be “enterprises” with their own capitalisation, or compels them to be less dependent on government revenue (Rikowski 2012; Saunders 2010). Consequently, as Rikowski (2012) further illustrates, neoliberalism gives rise to antagonism between staff (producers) and students (consumers) and leads to competition among members of staff—who live in “virtual teaching factories”. Thus, neoliberalisation—of universities—compels staff to “‘play to the gallery’ and try to score highly in an academic beauty contest, with a focus on eductainment, rather than intellectually challenging students” (Rikowski 2012, p. 25). It seeks to entertain the newly invented “student-consumer”, as I put it.

Therefore, although the intensity and time period associated with these changes differ from one nation-state to another (Alcántara et al. 2013; De Angelis & Harvie 2009; Gyamera 2015; Rikowski 2012; Saunders 2010; Stromquist & Sanyal 2013), the consequences or three pressing crises of the changes—the crisis of hegemony, the crisis of legitimacy, and the institutional crisis—that universities in the neoliberal era face, as per the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, are somewhat analogous (Torres 2011). Hence,

[t]he crisis of hegemony is the result of the growing intellectual deprivation of the university as it is increasingly called on to produce commercial knowledge at the expense of other forms of knowledge. The crisis of legitimacy is the result of the increasing segmentation of the university system and the growing devaluation of university diplomas. The institutional crisis of the university is the result of the decreased support by the state and the erasure of the public benefit mission that universities, especially public ones, traditionally served. . . (Rhoads & Torres 2006 cited in Torres 2011, p. 190)

Thus, despite the on-going crises in university education, of which neoliberalism is accused, neoliberalism has gradually become a “new” ideology or common sense: It dictates all facets of contemporary life (Rikowski 2012; Torres 2011, 2013). Therefore, notwithstanding the existence of some antitheses, such as the “University of Utopia” and solidarity between staff and students (Rikowski 2012; Stromquist & Sanyal 2013), university in the neoliberal era can simply be portrayed as a (factory) site in which human resources—employable graduates—are moulded in and for the free market. As such, since the late 1970s, meeting the needs of the free market—over and above civic engagement, democratic education, and learning for its own sake; the key focus of pre-neoliberal universities (Saunders 2010, pp. 54–55)—has become the *raison d'être* of universities across the world. Thus, the acceptance of the neoliberal logic of market-based development is not just (Western) rhetoric. Since economic liberalisation occurred in 1977, the embracing of neoliberal logic has also been noticeable in university education in Sri Lanka.

### **The “open economy” and the rise of the corporate middle class**

Open economic policy, or economic liberalisation, which the newly elected government of Sri Lanka introduced in 1977, promoted the privatisation of state enterprises and market-based competition in many sectors, including transportation and healthcare (Gunasinghe 1996; Wignaraja 1998). The

liberalisation, in its nascent stage, did not promote market-based competition in higher education—as in other societies (for example, De Angelis & Harvie 2009; Rikowski 2012; Saunders 2010)—although the government introduced fundamental changes to the university system by enacting the Universities Act, No. 16, of 1978 (Gamage 1996).

#### Private investment in higher education

However, liberalisation attracted investors to higher education. In 1981, the first private medical college in post-independence Sri Lanka—the North Colombo Medical College (NCCMC)—was established as a fee-levying institute (De Silva 2015). The NCCMC brought drastic changes to higher education. Other than the students’ performance in the university entrance examination—the General Certificate of Education (G.C.E.) Advanced Level—the NCCMC allocated marks for students’ performances in the G.C.E. Ordinary Level, extra-curricular activities, and the interview. The students also had to pass a test in English comprehension (De Silva 2015). Nevertheless, these criteria contradicted the admissions policy of the university system. Indeed, the student-consumer to whom the NCCMC directed its product—the medical degree—was exclusive and elite: Members of a select stratum of Sri Lankan society were able to afford it. This led to an outcry against the NCCMC. Hence, in 1989, the NCCMC was absorbed into the university system (Fonseka 2000).

Apart from this unsuccessful attempt, until recent years, history has not shown government-sponsored marketisation efforts in the higher education landscape. Nevertheless, since the 1980s, local and foreign degree-providing institutes have emerged. Simultaneously, the importance of marketisation has been emphasised at the policy level (Abeyratne & Lekamge 2012). In this context, as Hettige (2000) points out, the country’s education system has become highly differentiated and occupied in three distinct arenas: Public (state-funded),

private (market-driven), and transnational. Thus, not only did the emergence of profit-oriented institutes (both local and global) in the landscape result from the market-based competition of the open economy, but, as I argue, the desire of the ever-expanding corporate middle class in (the post-war) Sri Lanka also induced it.

### The paradox of the open economy

Economic liberalisation—in its nascent stage—gave rise to growth in investment, trade, and employment (in private sector) but negatively affected the light industrial sector, state enterprises, and the country’s social fabric (Gunasinghe 1996; Kadirgamar 2017; Wignaraja 1998). Coupled with the trade and exchange rate liberalisation, it promoted private investments, including Foreign Direct Investment, and cut the budgetary expenditure of nearly three decades old food subsidies. It simultaneously led to a shift from “administered prices” to “market prices” and compelled state corporations to be commercially viable (Kadirgamar 2017, p.10). Hence, economic liberalisation paved the path to emergence of what American Sociologist Lloyd Warner would call the “new rich” or “lower-upper” class (see, Warner, Meeker & Eells 2006)—the real beneficiaries of neoliberal capitalism or “crony capitalism” —and the expansion of the “upper-middle” class (the 7, 8 and 9 decile groups of all households ranked by the Department of Census and Statistics from the lowest to the highest household income); furthermore it widened income inequality (Department of Census and Statistics 2008, 2015; Dunham & Jayasuriya 1998; 2000; Gunasinghe 1996).

However, alongside the 1987–1989 (Sinhala) youth insurrection, Tamil separatist militancy, which led to a 30-year civil war, slowed down the market-based development of the open economy. Statistics show that the end of the separatist war in 2009 accelerated market-based development and resulted in the

growth of the urban or corporate middle class. For example, from 2006/07 to 2012/13, along with the per capita income growth, the share of the household income of the lower-upper and upper-middle classes in the urban sector, which I call the corporate middle class of the post-war era, was increased by more than 9 per cent. Also, the percentage of income that the richest 20 per cent of society—the “upper-upper class”—received remained above 50 per cent (Department of Census and Statistics 2008, 2015). In this context, Sri Lanka’s new status as a middle-income country and the ever-strengthening corporate middle class have created a demand for education, healthcare, and leisure activities—with a “global flavour” (Arunatillake 2013). The demand, as Foley (2013, p. 258) argues, is inevitable: “As people become richer, their priorities shift from meeting primarily material needs . . . to meeting less pressing and perhaps deferred needs for education”. Thus, as the government’s expenditure on education—compared to that of other nations—is worrying (Samarasinghe & Marshall 2012), the marketisation of the higher education landscape appears to be an unavoidable process. As evident in the following section, the emerging neoliberal common sense of wider society and the corporate middle class’ enthusiasm about association with global products support this impression.

### **The MacBurger and the corporate middle class**

Significant proportions of the lower-upper and upper-middle classes in post-war Sri Lanka do not constitute members of the conventional middle class(es), or the “crony capitalists”, who emerged in the open economy (Hettige 2000). They may have connections with these petty bourgeoisie classes; yet they are different from the latter in the sociocultural and economic dimensions. They mostly consist of white-collar workers, who typically work in the private (or transnational) corporate sector, with high disposable incomes. Alternatively, they may be from newly emerged entrepreneurial backgrounds. Moreover, they mostly live in urban areas (Arunatillake 2013; Department of Census and

Statistics 2011, 2015). Indeed, as far as economic activities, employment, and educational opportunities are concerned, unlike the conventional middle class, whose faith lies in the state (institutions), the corporatemiddle class, whose members are keen consumers of global products, prefers the private and transnational sectors (Hettige 2000). As such, it also represents the “global middle class”—with a daily expenditure of US dollar 10 to 100 per person per day in purchasing parity terms (Arunatillake 2013; Kharas & Gertz 2010).

As we have seen, the growth of the corporate middle class is notable in the post-war period. With its ever-increasing disposable income, the class has created a demand for the deferred needs for education (Arunatillake 2013). For example, in 2003, there were only 26 fee-levying private schools in Sri Lanka. Within a 10-year period, the figure has risen to 35 (Ministry of Education Sri Lanka 2004, 2013). Also, according to a survey conducted in 2012, “there appears to be around 46 [fee-levying higher education] institutions offering more than 200 degrees in Sri Lanka in partnership with foreign higher education institutions” (Pitigala-Arachchi 2012, p. 173). These figures have changed dramatically during the last couple of years. For example, in October 2016, the President of Sri Lanka ceremonially opened a fee-levying state institution of higher education with a student capacity of 30,000, namely the National School of Business Management (NSBM) Green University (‘NSBM Green University Town opens today’ 2016). Moreover, while the government’s 2017 budget proposals further restricted government allocations for state universities, which enrol nearly 26,000 students per annum (University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka 2015), they provided interest-free loan facilities (up to Rs. 800,000) for 15,000 students who sought to join fee-levying institutions of higher education (Ministry of Finance 2016).

In this context, alongside the discursive formation of non-state universities, the market-based development of higher education has been recognised as the panacea for all the ills of the state university system (Abeyratne & Lekamge 2012; Pitigala-Arachchi 2012). Simultaneously, the identity of the university student has been rearticulated as that of a student-customer, and the degree has been positioned as a “marketable commodity”: Now both non-state and state enterprises are offering it at a price that the select strata of society can afford. Interestingly, in this process, degrees that universities in the core capitalist countries offer are gaining the competitive edge (Education Times 2013, 2015, 2017; Little & Hettige 2016; ‘Obtain a foreign degree in Sri Lanka at SAITM Campus’ 2009; Torres 2011). Further, the influx of Anglo-American universities into the emerging higher education market created a problematic situation in the country. Global education brands (and products), which they brought to the market, hardly address the prevailing issues in the country’s higher education landscape, for example, insignificant research output, and insufficient human and physical resources (Samarasinghe & Marshall 2012). It is also doubtful that the products associated with these brands are “superior”. In most cases, the products are deprived of their “essence”—their ability to enhance student-consumers’ cultural capital via “superior ranking” or being “elite”, like the Oxbridge universities (Kupfer 2011). For example, some of the foreign universities, which attempted to establish their branches in the post-war period in Sri Lanka, are struggling to survive not only in the overseas market but also in its home country (see, Morgan 2014). Also, no single, local, fee-levying, non-state (or state) institution to which these foreign universities are affiliated is included in the QS World University Rankings (QS World University Rankings 2015/16 2015). Furthermore, even the Ranking Web of Universities (2016) lists these institutions in the range of 17,000 to 20,000, whereas state universities—such as University of Colombo, University of



Peradeniya and University of Sri Jayewardenepura—are in the range of 2,000 to 3,000.

Now, in the context of the historically neglected state university system, global education brands are gaining the acceptance of the corporate middle class and the general public through powerful propaganda (for example, see ‘Obtain a foreign degree in Sri Lanka at SAIMM Campus’ 2009; Kangaraarachchi 2011). However, on the one hand, the majority of the general public cannot afford them. On the other hand, ranking bodies, such as the University League Tables, and Research Excellence Framework tell a different story about these brands and their providers<sup>8</sup> (see, Research Excellence Framework 2014; The Complete University Guide 2016). With this backdrop, I wish to conceptualise this peculiar process using (a metaphor) the MacBurger, which has the status of posh food in Sri Lanka and the global status of low-cost, low-quality, popular food. I argue that the metaphor will explicate the dilemma in the on-going reshaping process of the higher education landscape in Sri Lanka.

### The MacBurger metaphor

There is no doubt that a global product/brand like the MacBurger is posh in Sri Lanka with respect to its unique characteristics, such as its unit price, which is above US dollar 1, and the culturally restrictive places where it is available—clean, air-conditioned places with English speaking staff, standardised products and parking facilities located in urban (and some suburban) areas of the country (Hennayake 2013). Hence, (blue-collar) people with low incomes—monthly per capita incomes of less than US dollar 25 and less than US dollar 50 (Department of Census and Statistics 2015)—hardly visit the “global places” like McDonald’s, KFC and Pizza Hut. And, the places that these (ordinary) people visit to eat and dine are mostly local food outlets—non-air-conditioned and rather unhygienic places with local-language speaking staff and relatively less

expensive local (and localised) food, such as “rice and curry” and “bread and dhal curry” in contrast. In this context, the MacBurger is a “cultural signifier” or “class identifier” for the corporate middle class, for their urban lifestyle, as it provides socio-spatial arrangements for the social gatherings of the class, for instance, birthday parties (Hennayake 2013). Indeed, the global places, such as McDonald’s and KFC, in Sri Lanka are viewed somewhat different in temperament from that of in the core capitalist societies—low-cost, low-quality, popular food outlets. As Hennayake (2013, p. 5) argues, they are designed and thought of as places of social status simply because, along with their cleanness and customers’ and employees’ profiles—their ability to speak in English—“the cost of food in these restaurants can be borne only by a particular class—that is the ‘globals’ in Sri Lanka”. Therefore, these places are in a unique affiliation with these “globals”—members of the corporate middle class—in Sri Lanka, who are keen to associate themselves with global brands.

Thus, I suggest that the MacBurger metaphor ironically denotes the enthusiasm of the corporate middle class to associate with global brands—its readiness to pay a relatively high price for a low-quality product to maintain its urban lifestyle and global brand association (Hennayake 2013; Hettige 2000). As such, if this metaphor has been situated in the higher education landscape of Sri Lanka, it would reveal the “truth” concerning most of the global products (degrees and diplomas) for which the corporate middle class is ready to pay a high price. In other words, as we have seen, many foreign universities, which are affiliated with both non-state and state enterprises of higher education in Sri Lanka, are “low-ranked” universities: They are struggling to survive in the global higher education market and in their own backyards. Thus, they are compelled to relocate some of their “business ventures” to less-competitive markets in Asia and Africa (Morgan 2014). Yet, the products (and the universities) are not posh and do not enhance the student-consumers’ cultural

capital though they say otherwise (Kangaraarachchi 2011; ‘Obtain a foreign degree in Sri Lanka at SAIMM Campus’ 2009).

The ability of non-state universities and their foreign partners to maintain student-customers’ faith in their products is not merely the result of the less-competitive higher education market in Sri Lanka. The reasons for it are multiple: On the one hand, since the 1990s, university enrolment in Sri Lanka—as a percentage of the number of qualified students—has been shrinking: It accounts for around 18 per cent of qualified students (University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka 2015). Simultaneously, the ever-growing desire of the corporate middle class to satisfy its needs in higher education has created a demand for global education brands (Little & Hettige 2016; Pitigala-Arachchi 2012). On the other hand, the less-marketable “local” brands of the fee-levying products of state universities (usually external degrees and diplomas) do not satisfy the desire of the corporate middle class; yet they have created a market among low-income groups. Therefore, the emergence of non-state universities in the open economy—and their growth in the post-war period—is embedded in the constraints of the Sri Lankan political economy and the (state) university system (Samarasinghe & Marshall 2012). In addition, the dynamics of the global higher education market, a trillion-dollar industry of neoliberal global capitalism (Altbach 2002; UNESCO 2009), intensify it.

### **The effects of marketisation**

However, the on-going process of reshaping the higher education landscape of Sri Lanka is subject to the resistance of a considerable proportion of the staff and students of the state universities and other social actors (‘Don’t recognise SAIMM degree – SLMC’ 2015; Liyanage 2012; ‘SAITM as model for expanding medical education?’ 2017). Indeed, the effects of the reshaping

process—on wider Sri Lankan society and university education—are problematic in the following ways.

- *Educational inequality*: Making higher education “products” (degrees and diplomas) marketable *commodities* pushes the student-consumers of low-income groups, particularly in the poverty-ridden rural areas of the country (Department of Census and Statistics 2015), to the periphery of the (job) market. In fact, since the economic liberalisation, income (and expenditure) inequality has widened (Dunham & Jayasuriya 1998, 2000). Even in the post-war context, Gini of the mean household income (and expenditure) remains around 0.48 (and 0.4), which is an indicator of high inequality (Department of Census and Statistics 2011, 2015). Hence, as is evident in comparable cases, income (and expenditure) inequality in the context of marketisation (Kupfer 2011; Stromquist & Sanyal 2013; Wilson & Scarbrough 2016) leads to “educational inequality” as marketisation creates more education opportunities for the rich and fewer (or no) opportunities for the poor (see, Little & Hettige 2016).
- *Dual-career freelancers*: The reshaping process has already made staff in state universities “dual-career freelancers”<sup>9</sup> in non-state universities as most of these institutes fulfil their academic labour needs through state universities: They are “full-timers” in state universities and “freelancers” in non-state (and fee-levying state) universities. This peculiar trend hinders their career development, research output, and contributions to their own universities. Furthermore, it has transformed the condition of “academic labour” into that of factory labour in the global assembly line using apparatus such as standardised curriculums, hourly (or piece-rate) payments, and direct surveillance (De Angelis & Harvie 2009).

- *Eurocentric knowledge*: Despite the rhetoric regarding the “international curriculum”, non-state (and state) universities which are affiliated to foreign universities promote “Eurocentric knowledge”—via standardised curriculums, modules, and assessment methods—which suppresses the “local episteme”: Indeed, Eurocentric knowledge (or curricula) hinders the development of curricula, which address and are embedded in “local” realities, and re-colonises higher education in the South (Altbach 2002; Gyamera 2015).
- *Identity crisis*: The reshaping process has rearticulated one-time “well-regarded identities” in Sri Lankan society, such as those of the lecturer, professor, vice-chancellor, and faculty, as “sloppy identities”. As such, “promoting” a lecturer (or anyone else) to the position of a professor in a non-state university, for example, has become an ad hoc decision, as these decisions are not governed by any regulatory body or institutional framework. This trend promotes (non-state) universities as teaching factories (Rikowski 2012) which pay little or no attention to research, learning, and staff development.
- *The policy of “marketable-commodities only”*: Non-state universities hardly offer products that have social value, but are not marketable (for example, degrees in agriculture). Instead, they are keen to offer products which have high market values but need no substantial investment, such as business management and computing, or offer products with high profit margins, such as medicine (Education Times 2013, 2015, 2017; Pitigala-Arachchi 2012; ‘Obtain a foreign degree in Sri Lanka at SAIMT Campus’ 2009). These trends, coupled with non-state universities’ propaganda campaigns and the social networks of their stakeholders, earn their products the competitive edge in the (job) market. As a result, the products of state universities in general and those of (new) state universities in remote areas of Sri Lanka in

particular—which have no aggressive branding or propaganda—seem less attractive in the (job) market.

Thus, although some argue that the on-going process of reshaping the higher education landscape enhances “freedom of education”—for the corporate middle class (De Silva 2015; Pitigala-Arachchi 2012)—its effects go far beyond the higher education landscape.

### **Concluding remarks**

The on-going process of reshaping the higher education landscape in Sri Lanka is among the constraints of the country’s political economy and university system (Abeyratne & Lekamge 2012). Moreover, the neoliberal agenda on global higher education intensifies it (Altbach 2002; Rikowski 2012; Torres 2011, 2013). Yet, its effects are problematic: The reshaping process threatens the existence of university education as a public good and, consequently, pushes the products of state universities, particularly students of modest socio-economic backgrounds, to the periphery of the (job) market. Despite these consequences and some resistances against them, the reshaping process—which is firmly supported by the government of Sri Lanka (see, Ministry of Finance 2016; ‘NSBM Green University Town opens today’ 2016)—is gaining the “acceptance” of the general public, which considers the process inevitable. Yet, the majority of the general public has been unable to afford the global (educational) products. In this context, the process has given rise to a new elite class in Sri Lanka, the corporate middle class. Subsequently, along with high-income (and expenditure) inequality, it has led to educational inequality in the country (Little & Hettige 2016).

As is evident in comparable cases (Kupfer 2011; Stromquist & Sanyal 2013), growing educational inequality will have adverse effects on wider Sri Lankan

society—especially regarding social equality and upward social mobility. Since the late 1960s, free (higher) education as leverage for upward social mobility has been deteriorating. However, it is still *the only way*—and hope—for children of low-income families, particularly in poverty-ridden rural areas, to climb the social ladder. Yet, the articulation of the student as a student-consumer, and the positioning of the degree as a marketable-commodity have further destabilised free (higher) education as leverage for upward social mobility. These developments have created new opportunities for the rich, especially for children in the corporate middle class (Little & Hettige 2016; Pitigala-Arachchi 2012). Further, they are simultaneously engaged in fuelling student and youth unrest in the country, which has been marked by a history of youth insurrections (Dunham & Jayasuriya 1998). In this context, I conclude that in the peripheral countries of the South, such as Sri Lanka, where free education is a long-standing public good and leverage for upward social mobility, the marketisation of (higher) education has adverse effects on wider society as well as the higher education landscape. Therefore, the higher education in these countries cannot be (simply) left as a commodity at the free market.

## Notes

1. The corporate middle class represents white-collar (managerial) workers who are typically employed in the private (or transnational) sector and live in the country's urban areas.
2. Despite health concern, fast food such as burger and pizza are stylish, showy and relatively expensive food items in the context of neoliberal Sri Lanka which are popular (and have been popularised since the 1990s), particularly among the corporate middle class as “posh food”.
3. From the 1980s, Sri Lanka was in a state of civil war, with Tamil militants in its North and East seeking a separate state. The war ended with their defeat in May 2009.
4. In 1948, Sri Lanka gained independence from the British colonisers who had ruled it for nearly 150 years.
5. Dr. C.W.W. Kannangara was the Minister of Education in the State Council of Ceylon. He introduced radical reforms, including tuition-free education, to the country's education system throughout the 1940s. They are known as the Kannangara reforms.
6. Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara Pirivenas, the prominent Buddhist education institutes in pre-independent Sri Lanka, were established respectively in 1873 and 1875. In 1958 they were elevated to

the level of universities and in 1978 renamed as the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and the University of Kelaniya respectively.

7. This was problematic as far as the university admission of Tamil-speaking students was concerned. Standardisation and the district quota system introduced in the 1970s reduced their intake into universities.
8. Despite some ranking controversies, many foreign universities, which are affiliated with non-state (and state) institutes, are “low-ranked” universities (with no significant research output). On ethical grounds, I avoid listing them here.
9. Another aspect of this dual-career is that some faculty members at state universities spend much time on fee-levying postgraduate and external degree and diploma programmes, which emerged as part of the reshaping process.

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